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Demographic dynamics and sustainability*

Report of the Secretary-General

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* This report was prepared by the United Nations Population Fund as task manager for chapter 5 of Agenda 21, with contributions from other United Nations agencies and international organizations. The report is a brief factual overview, which is intended to inform the Commission on Sustainable Development on key developments in the subject area.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report summarizes progress made since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in the area of demographic dynamics and sustainability, including gaps and constraints encountered, and future trends and challenges.

2. Agenda 21[1] and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994)[2] recommended actions to ensure the integration of policies concerning population and the environment, addressing the environmental implications of demographic dynamics. They also called for measures to enhance the full participation of relevant groups, especially women, at all levels of decision-making to achieve sustainable management of natural resources. These messages were re-emphasized at the five-year reviews of the two Conferences.

3. In most countries, declining population growth in the 1980s and 1990s has allowed more time to adjust to future population increases and has increased the ability to combat poverty, invest in education and other social services, protect and repair the environment and build the base for future sustainable development. A difference of even a single decade in the transition to a stable population can have a considerable positive impact on sustainability and the overall quality of life.

II. Demographic dynamics

4. The latest United Nations estimates and projections of world population show a continuing slowing of population growth. The world population was estimated at 6 billion in 2000, up from 2.5 billion in 1960, and 4.4 billion in 1980. World population is projected to grow to about 8 billion in 2025 and 9.3 billion in 2050. The world population growth rate has declined from a peak of 2 per cent in 1965 to 1.7 per cent in 1980 and to 1.3 per cent in 2000. It is projected to decline to 1 per cent around 2020 and 0.5 per cent in 2050, with all of the population growth after 2025 occurring in the developing countries.[3]

5. The world's poorest countries tend to have the highest population growth rates, undermining their efforts to invest in human development, reduce poverty and promote sustainable development. Of the 77 million people being added to the world's population each year, most are born in the world's poorest countries in Africa and Asia. Since there will still be significant annual increases in population in the developing world for some decades, the environmental and social implications remain far-reaching for many poor countries, particularly where water is scarce, where population density is already high, and where land degradation and deforestation are most severe. High fertility rates and the resulting high ratio of children to working-age adults make it particularly difficult to meet the international target of providing all children with at least an elementary education.

6. Large movements of people from rural to urban areas are continuing in most developing countries, leading to a growing number of mega-cities which have in many cases overwhelmed the environmental resources of the area and spawned huge peri-urban slums. The urban share of the world population grew from 30 per cent in 1950 to 47 per cent in 2000, and the urban population is growing three times as fast as the rural population.[4] By 2005, half of the world's population is expected to be urban. The implications for development and the environment are profound, as urban authorities strive to provide infrastructure and basic social services, including housing, energy, water, sewage disposal, transportation and communications.

7. Urbanization and other migratory movements affect rural as well as urban communities. In many countries, out-migration of younger rural residents, combined with fertility declines and increases in mortality among younger adults, due to HIV/AIDS, is leading to rapid ageing of rural populations, sharp increases in old-age dependency, and widespread reductions in labour supply. Such changes can result in the economic stagnation of rural regions, adding to the existing disparities between rural areas and cities, and intensifying the relative social and economic vulnerability of rural people.

8. International migration is small compared with internal migration but has a disproportionate impact. Both internal and international migration are driven by economic and social disparities within and between countries and by population pressures. The combination of poverty, rapid population growth and environmental degradation is a powerful destabilizing factor driving rural-to-urban migration and, eventually, international migration. This is most marked in parts of Africa but can also be seen in South Asia and some Latin American countries.

9. The HIV/AIDS pandemic raging across the world, particularly in developing countries, represents a crisis of exceptional proportions. It raises mortality, lowers fertility, creates imbalances in the age and sex composition of populations, and leaves millions of orphans in its wake. Because AIDS takes its greatest toll among young adults, it cuts deeply into the fabric of affected societies and has a devastating impact on human resources, economic productivity, management of natural resources, and social and economic development in general. In a large number of developing countries, HIV/AIDS now represents a major obstacle to economic growth and sustainable development.

10. In Africa, AIDS is now the primary cause of death, with the highest infection rates among people in their twenties and thirties. In southern Africa, life expectancy, which increased from 44 years in the early 1950s to 59 in the early 1990s, is expected to fall back to 45 years by 2010. The HIV infection rate in Africa may now have peaked, in part because of successful prevention programmes in a number of countries. The infection rate in Asia is lower but increasing.

11. The ageing of human populations — growth in the number and proportion of older people due to increasing life expectancy and declining fertility — is one of the most significant demographic processes shaping the world today. In many countries, developed and developing, the ratio of people over age 60 to the working-age population is projected to more than double between now and 2050, creating problems for the financing of pensions, health care and other social support for older persons.

III. Achievements

12. The two United Nations conferences on environment and population and their five-year reviews have increased the focus on population/environment linkages and their development implications. National sustainable development strategies and national conservation strategies which take into account demographic variables are being developed by many countries in the follow-up to the global conferences. An increasing number of countries have formulated local versions of Agenda 21 and are implementing them.

13. Many countries have established a ministerial body or subcommittee charged with addressing population concerns and with integrating them into national development strategies and policies. In some countries, Governments have established a ministry for population and environment, with responsibility for formulating population policy, developing programmes, conducting research and coordinating population, family planning and environment-related activities with various governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations.

14. Countries that have been successfully monitoring progress towards the goals and objectives set forth at the two conferences and the five-year reviews — in particular, progress in integrating population concerns into development strategies — have developed a comprehensive list of indicators and have charged specific ministries, subcommittees or departments with tracking them. Although most countries continue to use traditional economic, social and demographic indicators, many have supplemented them with environmental indicators.

15. Gender issues and their relationship to sustainable development figured prominently at the two conferences and the five-year reviews. Increasing attention is being given to the critical role of women in population and environment programmes and in achieving sustainable development. Agenda 21 and the Programme of Action stress that empowerment of women is essential and that improving the status of women through better access to education, reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health, and jobs will yield high returns through reduced fertility, increased production, and improved environmental management.

16. Computer models and tools have been developed to better understand and address population/poverty/environment linkages. Two models that have received United Nations support for application in developing countries are the Population/Development/Environment (PDE) model, developed by the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, and the Threshold 21 model of the Millennium Institute. Among the useful tools for integrating population and environmental factors into development planning are geographic information systems (GIS) which combine mapping data, ecosystem carrying-capacity assessments and ecological risk analysis, together with economic, social and administrative

information, to support integrated development analysis and planning. Participatory action research tools have been designed to help communities assess natural resource management, population dynamics, health status of the population and gender-related factors.

17. In many countries, community-based organizations and other local non-governmental organizations have developed innovative approaches for promoting sustainable livelihoods together with environmental protection and access to health services, including reproductive health. An increasing number of non-governmental organizations are engaged in activities relating to population and environment in the wake of the two conferences.

IV. Gaps and constraints

18. Resource limitations in many countries have constrained the efforts of Governments to address population and environmental concerns. In many countries, conflicts, crises, natural disasters and economic, social and political instability have also limited the ability of Governments to implement Agenda 21 and other global conference results. Breakdowns in governance, inadequate infrastructure and competing financial priorities have reduced access to a range of basic social services, particularly quality health care and reproductive health services.

19. While national sustainable development strategies, including population policies, have been formulated in many countries, much remains to be done in terms of implementation. Countries have cited the following constraints: (a) lack of a cross-sectoral conceptual framework based on the complex interrelationships between population, environment and sustainable development; (b) lack of suitable and accurate data; and (c) lack of financial and human resources to implement policies and programmes.

20. Although some progress has been made, population issues have not been fully integrated into sustainable development policy, planning and programming. In particular, insufficient attention is being paid to the relationship between demographics, environment and poverty, especially as they affect the most vulnerable groups. Analysis of these linkages has been limited by the use of traditional static and linear models that are unable to take into account the dynamics of these factors.

21. Population growth, poverty and environmental degradation are most closely linked in rural areas of developing countries, particularly in rural Asia and Africa where a large majority of world poverty is found. A large majority of the rural poor are dependent on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods and sustenance. Declines in per capita arable land and water supply, together with the degradation of soils, forests, grasslands and water quality, are making life increasingly hard for the rural poor, driving out-migration to urban slums and agricultural plantations, and often separating families. The share of development assistance going to sustainable agricultural development has been declining in recent years.

22. While a number of countries have committed financial support to population and environmental concerns, considerable effort is still needed to mobilize the resources required to fund the integrated population, environment and sustainable development activities spelled out in Agenda 21 and the Programme of Action.

V. Future trends and challenges

23. Over the past decade, many countries have made good progress in putting in place population- and environment-related policies and programmes designed to achieve the conference goals. Nevertheless, much remains to be done. Priority should be given to poverty eradication programmes targeted particularly at rural areas, women and female-headed households.

24. There is need to identify population/poverty/environment "hotspots", where poverty and environmental degradation have reached critical thresholds and where population pressures are important contributing factors.

25. Planners and decision makers, especially those working at the local level, need support in developing a better understanding of the causes and cumulative effects of population/environment linkages. They also need support for the development of knowledge and tools aimed at generating the specific and accurate data and analysis needed for policy formulation and decision-making within a coordinated framework that reflects the complex interrelationships, taking into

account the affordability of activities, short-term costs and benefits, and externalities.

26. Women and children experience disproportionately the effects of poverty and environmental stresses. The empowerment of women and their inclusion in policy-making and implementation should be an integral part of policy initiatives for population, environment and sustainable development. Measures that help to increase and ensure their rights, health and welfare are likely to create benefits in all three areas because of their pivotal role in resource management, income generation, child care, education, nutrition and health care.

27. The interrelationships between environmental pressure and migration is drawing increased attention from the international community since the number of persons displaced by environmental degradation is continually rising, as is the level of environmental damage resulting from mass migrations. It is expected that the number of people at risk of environmental displacement will grow. Most of the displaced persons, sometimes referred to as "environmental refugees", live in the African Sahel, the Horn of Africa, other parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia — areas generally characterized by high population growth — and in Mexico and China.

28. The capacity of non-governmental organizations working in the field of population and environment needs strengthening in order to enhance their managerial, technical and administrative capacities to contribute to the implementation of the commitments made at the two conferences. Partnerships between public and private organizations for the further implementation of Agenda 21 and the Programme of Action need to be intensified.

29. Use of the mass media and information technology, including Internet technology, should be expanded so as to increase awareness and understanding of population, environment and sustainable development linkages and to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Advocacy campaigns should be utilized to build and sustain political commitment for the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Programme of Action. They should convey messages about population, environment and sustainable development in popular, easy-to-understand language.

30. In order to achieve the conference goals, there is need for greater efforts to mobilize resources to implement the activities defined in Agenda 21 and the Programme of Action and to use existing resources effectively and efficiently. Technical assistance is an essential complement to national efforts.

Notes

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8), vol. I, resolution 1, annex II.

[2] *Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.95.XIII.7), chap. I, resolution 1, annex.

[3] *World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision* (To be issued as a United Nations publication.)

[4] *World Urbanization Prospects: The 1999 Revision* (To be issued as a United Nations publication.)